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T H E

AMERICAN NATURALIST.

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S H E L L - M O N E Y .

BY R. E. C. STEARNS.

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TO THE numismatist the love of money is not fraught with evil; his love is not the worship of Mammon or the miser's greed, but rather the ardor of the philosopher or the enthusiasm of the naturalist; he glorifies his coins, not for their commercial value, but for their antiquity or historical associations. As he ponders over his collection, a panorama of past centuries unrolls before him; he sees a long procession of great events, the rise and fall of nations and of men whose emblems and effigies, embossed upon their money, have outlived the national life. More eloquent than written history are these speechless coins. Though silent, they tell of epochs in the lives of the nations they represent, and of eras in the history of the human race.

Notwithstanding the importance of money from an historical point of view, it is not probable that its invention was due to any other cause than commercial necessity; although coins for money are the offspring of civilization, yet the convenience of some medium, less bulky and more durable than ordinary merchandise, by which the differences occurring in transactions of trade or barter may be adjusted, has been recognized by barbarous tribes as well as by civilized people.

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The knowledge and use of peculiar narcotics and alcoholic beverages by portions of the human race, both civilized and barbarous, unacquainted with and widely separated from each other is a well-known fact. Analogous to this is the use of some form of money or a medium in trade by isolated and remote tribes.

The earlier coins of ancient Rome appear rude and grotesque when placed side by side with the exquisitely wrought coins and medals of Napoleon the First. But what a degree of civilization and knowledge of the arts do they proclaim when compared with the barbarism of those wild tribes of Africa and America, whose utter ignorance of the arts has led them to use as a substitute for metallic money, the shells of the ocean!

Mr. J. K. Lord, naturalist to the British North American Boundary Commission, during the years 1858-62, mentions the use of shells as money by the natives of the North-west coast of America, as follows:

"It is somewhat curious that these shells (*Dentalia*) should have been employed as money by the Indians of North-western America; that is, by the native tribes inhabiting Vancouver's Island, Queen Charlotte's Island and the main-land coast from the Straits of Fuca to Sitka. Since the introduction of blankets by the Hudson Bay Company the use of these shells, as a medium of purchase, has to a great extent died out, the blankets having become the money, as it were, or the means by which everything is now reckoned and paid for by the savage. A slave, a canoe or a squaw, is worth in these days so many blankets; but it used to be so many strings of *Dentalia*."

Mr. W. H. Dall, who has recently returned from Alaska, and whose opportunities for observation have been ample, informs me that the *Dentalia* are used by the native Alaskans, and that the furs purchased of the Indians by the fur companies, or their agents and traders, are still, at least in part paid for with these shells. This is still farther confirmed by

the facts that the larger European species of *Dentalia* are imported especially for this trade, and I have myself seen in the fancy goods stores in San Francisco, strings of these shells displayed for sale with beads and other Indian goods.

It is undoubtedly true, as stated by Mr. Lord, that the use of shell-money has, in a great measure, ceased at the points he mentions, as the increased number of white traders and visitors at the principal towns on the coast, as far north as Sitka, has somewhat familiarized the natives with the manners and customs of civilized people, which their natural shrewdness would lead them to adopt so far as it might be to their advantage.

As proof of the "cuteness" of the "untutored savage" in this latter respect, it may be interesting to state that at or about the time of the purchase by and transfer to the United States of the territory of Russian America, attended as it was by the visit of a considerable number of adventurers, and others at Sitka, the prices of venison and other game, was, in the language of traffic, so far "marked up" that gold or its equivalent, to the amount of one dollar a piece was charged for salmon, a most exorbitant price, not justified by any greatly increased demand, or by any unusual scarcity of this wonderfully abundant fish in that country.

In the year 1861, during a visit of a month's duration upon the coast of California, at Crescent City, in Del Norte County, I found that in barter between themselves, the Indians used for money the shells of *Dentalium pretiosum* Sowerby, a species that is found all along the North-west coast of America and which, either the shells or the shell-money, is called by the Indians, if I remember correctly, *Alli-ko-cheek* (orthography not warranted correct), and the longer the shells the greater the value, which was reckoned by measuring the shells by the finger joints. I am quite sure that the same species were used by the Indians who live in the Klamath River country in the next county to the south, and who get their name from the river, being known as the Klamath Indians.

Aside from the use of *Dentalium pretiosum* as money, I saw at Crescent City a medicine man belonging to some of the tribes of the neighborhood, who had perforated the grizzly partition which separates the nostrils, and having thrust into the hole thus made two of these shells, point to point, one from each side, for half the length of the shells, perfected this nasal ornamentation by thrusting the feathers of some wild fowl into each of the hollow shells, producing an effect somewhat resembling a mustache.

At Bodiga, much farther to the south on the coast of California, and near the old Russian settlement in Sonoma County, a place visited by me in the month of June, 1867, I was informed by some of the residents that the Indians of that neighborhood, living, however, somewhat back from the coast, used pieces of the bivalve shell known as *Saxidomus gracilis** for money, but why they should use this shell instead of the lustrous and pearly *Haliotis rufescens*, which is fully as abundant, it is impossible to discover.

The use of shells or pieces of shell by the aborigines of North America, was well known and recorded years ago. By reference to the Massachusetts Historical Collections, it will be seen that the early settlers of New England found that shells, or strings of shells, were used by the Indians, both for money and ornament, and were called by them *Wompompeage* or *Wampum*.

The natives of some of the islands of the Indo-Pacific region use the shells of *Litorina obesa*, and they also make very pretty work by evenly fastening these shells to pieces of bark, which, when made, they use for personal ornament. In other of the islands, I have been informed that the banded variety of *Nerita polita* is used for the same purposes.

Cypræa annulus is used by the Asiatic islanders to adorn their dress, to weight their fishing nets, and for barter. Specimens of it were found by Dr. Layard in the ruins of Nimroud.†

* *Tapes gracilis* Gould. † Woodward's Manual, second edition, p. 233.

The money cowry, *Cypræa moneta*, a native of the Pacific and Eastern seas, is used as money in Hindostan and many parts of Africa. They are chiefly brought from the Maldives, and are an article of trade at Bombay. Many tons weight are annually imported to this country (Great Britain), and again exported for barter with the native tribes of Western Africa. In the year 1848 sixty tons were imported into Liverpool, and in 1849 nearly three hundred tons were brought to the same port.*

Reeve mentions in the second volume of the "Conchologia Systematica," that "a gentleman residing some time since at Cuttack, is said to have paid for the erection of his bungalow entirely in these cowries (*C. moneta*). The building cost him about 4000 *rupees sicca* (£400 sterling), and as sixty-four of these shells are equivalent in value to one 'pice,' and sixty-four 'pice' to a *rupee sicca*, he paid for it with above sixteen millions of these shells."

It will be seen, therefore, that shells have been and are still used as money by a considerable portion of the human race, and it would be quite difficult to point out any other natural production that would be more appropriate or convenient, when size, shape and substance, are considered.

The money of the wild tribes of America, Africa and Asia, one may look for in vain in the drawers of the coin collector. It must be sought for in the museums of natural history, or the cabinets of the conchologist.

THE BOTANY OF CENTRAL ILLINOIS.

BY E. L. GREENE.

IN a region of extensive prairies, the monotonous uniformity of the landscape affords none of the conditions for a flora rich in species. Although the soil of these vast

* Baird's Dictionary of Natural History, p. 193.